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Written by Lucy Robinson

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The Day We Disappeared

LUCY ROBINSON



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There's no freedom quite like a flat-out gallop early on a summer morning.

This book is for my mum, Lyn, without whom I'd never have known.

A young girl sits at the edge of the field with long fronds of prairie grass tickling her chin. She can smell the daisies hung in chains around her neck; a sour, sappy sort of smell that reminds her of gone-off milk and thunder. She leans back against the dry-stone wall and watches a little bug wander up her shin. There are many bugs here; bugs and itches and brilliant green slashes of grass speckled with tiny hairs.

The sun climbs higher in the sky. She wants to go and sit under the ancient beeches across the field, their swaying green leaves overhead like kaleidoscopes, those gnarled roots that you can tuck yourself into during hide and seek.

Her mother is still in the wood. She wants to go and find her, insist that they resume their game. But she can't. Without fully understanding why, she knows she must stay by the wall, concealed by the long grass, until her mother reappears.

They are going to pick apples later and make an apple tart tartan, whatever that is.

She sniffs her forearm, which smells strange and hot and mallowy, and wonders how much longer it will be until something happens. She doesn't like this game.

Out in the centre of the meadow, where the grass is shorter, daisies form a vivid blanket that shimmers strangely in the unyielding heat of the day. The girl wishes she'd never suggested hide and seek.

She hears another sound from deep within the woods, a horrible, frightening sound, and she starts to cry.

Chapter One

KATE

I stared in confusion at the hayloft.

It was not a hayloft.

It was a square white room with a single bed and a sticker on the wardrobe saying, 'I ♥ PONIES!' Even more disappointing was an unironic poster of Mark Waverley, my new employer, staring into the camera with a horse at his side. Perhaps the photographer had told him to try to look mysterious and a bit smouldery, but it hadn't worked out. He looked like a twat. Handsome, but still a twat.

The girl who had shown me up the stairs was watching me with amusement and undeniable pity. She knows, I thought, embarrassed. She knows I expected this to be a hayloft.

'Everything OK, pet?' she asked, in the mother of all Geordie accents. A smile was gathering at the weather-bruised skin round her eyes.

'Yes! It's . . . It's a lovely room!'

'Aye,' she agreed insincerely. 'Beautifully done.'

I smiled. 'It's not quite on a par with the others.'

But it was at the top of the house. A busy house, at that. It would do.

'I'm Becca,' she said, pulling off a big furry headband she'd been wearing outside. 'And I'm sorry you've got the

worst room. The trainee always gets this one, I'm afraid! But at least you're at the top of the house, so less chance of Joe marching in naked and demanding Good Times.'

'Joe?'

'He's one of the other grooms. Randy little bastard.' She saw my face pale. 'Ah, I'm only joking, pet. Joe's a filthy old whore but he always asks first.'

'Ha-ha-ha-ha,' I said weakly. 'Always asks first. Grand.'

I clawed together what I thought to be a bright smile – the kind of smile they'd call *effervescent* in a magazine – so Becca wouldn't realize I was close to hysteria.

'So, your first job in an equestrian yard?' Her eyes drifted down to my brand-new red Hunter wellies.

'It is. You can probably tell by my wellies.'

Becca, who seemed like too decent a person to laugh at anyone's footwear, just shrugged. She had cropped hair and a nose ring and a dead roll-up sticking out between tattooed fingers. It looked like a sickly old snout that had given up and died in her hand.

That was how I was beginning to feel. Like a sickly old snout who had given up and . . . *Sweet Jesus, will you stop it!* I told myself. I was Kate Brady, that chirpy little whatsit from Dublin! Kate Brady did not wallow around in the Bad Shit! Not now, not ever!

'First job it is,' I said, more stoutly. 'But I'm not a total stranger to a horse.'

'I'd hope not, pet!'

Christ. I wasn't far off.

Becca hugged my radiator for warmth; it wasn't balmy in there. 'We had a little posh kid in on work experience last week,' she told me. 'Eighteen, straight out of ag college . . .

One of those kids who leans on the broom rather than sweeping, you know?'

'I do so.' I tutted, taking note.

'And you know what she said on her first day, the silly beggar?'

'What?'

'She said, "So this place is like those Jilly Cooper novels, right? I can't *wait* to meet Mark – he's gorgeous!" I thought, Kill me now.'

'No!' I made myself titter. 'She thought it was going to be all champagne and humping your man there?'

'Exactly.' Becca shook her head. 'She was here lookin' for Rupert Campbell-Black, the silly girl.'

'Rupert Campbell-Black!' I crowed. 'Oh, sweet Jesus!' I'd have said all of that.

Becca ran her hands through her hair, which was very tired and dirty. Although all of her was, really. Bits of hay stuck to the top of her long socks and her fleece was full of holes. She had tattoos poking out of every piece of clothing she wore, and muted trance music was playing from her room, across the landing from mine.

Becca was the antithesis of anyone I'd read about in a Jilly Cooper novel, although I liked her already. There was humour lurking in her features and she'd looked after me with a touching warmth since I'd slid into the communal kitchen half an hour ago, all shaking hands and wild eyes.

I hope she'll become my friend, I thought. I was in desperate need of an ally.

'Sex and parties and whatnot.' Becca was looking wistful. 'This must be the only eventing yard where that doesn't

happen. If she wanted rock 'n' roll she should've have gone and worked down the road at Caroline's, eh?'

'Caroline?'

'Caroline Lexington-Morley!'

'Of *course*,' I murmured.

Becca seemed not to notice that I had no idea who she was talking about. 'Caroline and her grooms are always first at the bar the night before a competition opens, while we're stuck in Mark's lorry polishing his boots. A charmless arsehole, pet, and he's not even good-looking. Jilly Cooper'd never write a character like that.' She massaged her heel, scowling comically at Mark's poster. 'Someone did an article in *Elle* recently, about him being Team GBR's heartthrob. Mark bloody Waverley? She must have been on the 'shrooms! He's a toad!'

I turned back to the poster in surprise. In spite of the scowl, the man was unequivocally good-looking: tall, dark-haired, classically handsome. Quite similar to Colin Firth, I thought, but without the softness of his eyes. There was nothing toadish going on there. Then again, Becca didn't look like she was very interested in men. And the coldness in Mark's face – that slight sense of unmined anger – did not sit well with me either.

I'd seen Mark Waverley at the London Olympics in 2012 and had greatly admired his bottom and the calm, unflinching way he'd ridden that monstrous cross-country course. But I'd been a different person then. All I'd needed to worry about were matters like rain ponchos or the length of the burger queue. Had anyone told me that within a couple of years I'd have quit my life and started working for him deep in the West Country of England I'd

have laughed, then cried, then probably just ended it all.

'Well,' I said eventually, 'he doesn't look very comfortable in his own skin.'

Becca roared with laughter. 'Mark Waverley is more comfortable in his own skin than any other man I've met! Perhaps if he was a little less comfortable he wouldn't be such an arsehole, pet. You noticed that in your interview, I'd imagine?'

I frowned. 'Well, actually –'

Becca carried on: 'If I didn't get to look after such beautiful horses I'd have left years ago. He's not right in the head – this place is like an equestrian labour camp at times.'

I started to wilt, in spite of my fierce intention to remain perky. Had I managed to walk into a nightmare as big as the one I'd just exited? Was this, like everything else I'd done in recent memory, just another huge error of judgement?

You're grand, Kate Brady, I told myself determinedly. The Jilly Cooper thing was just a passing thought! You're not shallow, just a little bit mad at the moment. And if this place is going to involve hard work then so much the better, quite frankly. You need something else to think about.

'Well, your man didn't interview me,' I said. 'I only met Sandra, so I suppose I have the pleasure of Mark to come.'

Becca stopped massaging her heel. 'Sandra? *Sandra* hired you?' She began to grin.

'Yes. Is that unusual?'

'I'd fuckin' well say, pet!'

Sandra had been absolutely delightful: a cup of hot chocolate in human form, who'd chatted happily with me about how nice horses smelt and about how desperately

proud she was of her son. 'To have come from almost nowhere and end up in the World Class squad in just six years!' she'd said mistily, as if I knew the significance of this. 'Mark is a very special man; I'm sure you'll love working for him. If you'd like the job, dear?'

I'd said yes, absolutely, and suddenly we were shaking hands and she was telling me I could join the team as a live-in trainee yard assistant starting next week, if that was OK?

'That's perfect,' I'd whispered, cradling my first tiny scrap of hope in a very long time. This could be it. The one-way ticket out of my life that I'd so longed for, while never really believing such a thing could exist. It didn't matter that I wasn't getting paid. I'd have somewhere to live, food on the table and a lot of miles between me and trouble. I'd be safe here, folded into the Exmoor hills, surrounded by people yet screened off from the world.

Becca was still looking perplexed. 'Sandra interviewed you, eh? Well, Mark'd only have let his mam do it if he was already dead certain about you.'

Something wasn't right here. 'Really?'

'Sandra's away with the fairies, that's all, pet, and I've never known her to do the interviews. But Mark'll have gone through your CV with a fine-tooth comb. It'll all be groovy.'

'I told you so,' said the Bad Shit. 'Didn't I say it was all a bit too easy? Didn't I?'

I'd marvelled, upon finishing my interview, at how simple it had been just to waltz in and get a job at one of the most prestigious eventing yards in the country. I knew next to nothing about horses and even less about eventing

but I was perfectly clear about who Mark Waverley was: he was about as good as it got, not just in Britain but in the world. How extraordinary that he'd been happy to have a total novice crashing round his yard! How lucky that all I'd had to do was agree with Sandra that her son was a great rider! It was all too good to be true!

From the sound of things, it was exactly that. *Please, no*, begged a frightened little voice inside me. *I need this job to work out.*

I sat down suddenly on the edge of my bed and the Bad Shit cackled. It had me back in its sights.

The Bad Shit referred to any and all things that made life less than splendid. 'Kate Brady's so good at being happy, isn't she now?' people said. 'Look how effortlessly she avoids all the Bad Shit!'

The trouble was that lately the Bad Shit had got out of hand. *Come on, Brady,* I pleaded. *Fight.*

'So . . . What sort of thing would Mark have been looking for on my CV?' I asked pathetically. Hot, hopeless tears built in my eyes, ready for the humiliation of her reply. I hadn't an ounce of fight in me.

Becca shrugged. 'Ah, you know, the usual stuff. Years hanging round horses, good stable management, decent riding skills – although you won't get on a horse any time soon. Just mad enthusiasm, you know!'

'And, erm, just to be clear, it *is* a trainee's job, right? Even though you'd still need to be really experienced to do it?'

'Jesus, yes! Can you imagine putting a complete novice in here? Under Mark?'

I tried everything to stop the tears falling. I tipped my

head back and breathed hard, but there was no stopping them. A big bobble of shame and despair rolled fatly out of one eye, followed by another. And then they fell like pouring water, down my exhausted face and on to my crispy new Gore-Tex coat.

This job was not the solution. It was not the solution at all. I would be sent packing in the morning. And then? Fear moved in my stomach, black and fast.

Becca came over. 'Is there a problem, pet?' she asked cheerfully. Then: 'Obviously there's a fuckin' problem. Tell Auntie Becca. We'll sort you right out.'

I cried until I had nothing left.

Becca dug around in her pockets and found a damp, balled-up tissue and a weird navy glove with pimples on it. 'You could blow your nose on one of these,' she offered. 'Although if I were you I'd use that nice new sleeve of yours.'

Slowly, sadly, I wiped my nose on my nice new sleeve. 'I'm going to be sacked,' I said eventually.

'Ah, We all think that. Especially when Hitler over there has a go at us,' she said, gesturing at Mark Waverley's poster. 'But you'll be just fine, my little duck. You're only shovelling shit after all.'

I wiped my hands on my jeans and smiled flatly. 'No, I really will get sacked. I don't know the first thing about horses,' I told her. 'I've never been in an equestrian yard in my life. Let alone one like this.'

Becca cocked her head to one side. It was not even comprehensible to her that I might be telling the truth.

I took a deep breath. 'Sandra and me basically had a big gossip about Mark and how nice he is, and she offered me the job on the spot.'

Becca frowned. 'But your CV, pet, I don't understand . . .'

'I didn't bother sending one. I just sent an email in response to the ad online, and said I loved horses and was willing to work hard and . . . I didn't know! It said it was a trainee job!'

'Right. But surely . . .'

'But surely nothing. I needed to get out of Dublin and there was a job in Somerset for an entry-level trainee. Boom.'

Becca thought for a bit. 'So you've never looked after horses? Like, never?'

I leaned down and opened my zipper case. Inside were a few pairs of Topshop jeans and a nice merino wool cardigan. Alongside sat a pair of brown suede ankle boots and a skirt. Plus a not immodest collection of facial skincare products. 'Do you think,' I asked, 'that if I'd looked after horses, I'd have packed like this?'

Becca peered inside. 'Ah.'

I put my head into my hands and Becca sucked in her breath, pondering my situation. I wondered if they'd even let me stay the night, and with that thought, I started to cry again.

'Ah, don't go crying,' she said absently. 'All's not lost, like.'

'All is seriously lost,' I wept. 'And on top of everything else I've gone and messed you all around.'

Becca patted my arm. There was a tattoo of a little mouse on her hand. 'It's fine,' she soothed. 'We can just advertise for someone new, it's no big deal. Mark'll probably shout at his mam for a bit, she'll say she's sorry, we'll all have a good laugh about it and you can find another job. A better one!'

'There is no better job!' I muttered. '*This* was the one. I need this job more than I can tell you . . .'

Becca carried on patting my arm while I cried, watching me with a fascination that I'd otherwise have found funny. 'Pet,' she asked eventually. 'Have you got yourself into a spot of bother?'

A spot of bother. I almost smiled.

'Well, I know all about those,' she said kindly. 'And if you need to keep the job then I'll help you blag it. But you'll have to tell me what we're working with here.'

I felt so hopeless at that moment that I almost considered telling her the whole story. 'Well,' I began, after a sniffy pause. Best to stick with the headlines for now. 'I had a bit of a breakdown.'

Becca looked cheerful. 'Didn't we all?'

'I was after working for Google in Dublin but I'd to leave because I was suffering severe stress.'

Becca, rather to my surprise, started sniggering. 'Have you escaped the nuthouse?' she asked. 'Are there a load of psychiatric folk on your trail?'

'Erm, I hope not. I didn't go mad, just hit a wall quite badly. Executive stress, you know.'

Becca slapped her leg. 'Ha-HA! Executive stress! Whatever next?'

I smiled thinly. 'The job was fine, it was me that was the problem. I mean, they did everything they could to support me . . . But I'm just a fruitloop. Burned myself out, let everything get to me. You know.'

Becca nodded sympathetically but I could tell she was trying not to laugh.

I took a deep breath. 'I came here because I wanted –

literally – some fresh air. I wanted to be somewhere I wouldn't have any cause to think about Dublin and the Bad Shit for a long time.'

Becca couldn't keep it up any longer. First she snorted, then she gave up and roared with laughter. 'Pet, you need a lobotomy! I can't believe you! You left your job suffering stress and you came to a *horse* yard to recover? Where you'd have to do manual labour twelve hours a day? What were you thinking?'

'Um . . .'

'Could you not have gone and worked in a kebab van or something, my little love? Oh, God, this is priceless.'

In spite of everything, of how exhausted and frightened I was, I smiled. Becca rolled across my bed with an imaginary rifle and took a stealth position at my window, lining someone up in her sights. With her cropped hair and dark eyes she was pretty authentic, I thought.

'Boom,' she whispered, into an imaginary mouthpiece. 'Both hostiles are down. This area is clear, I repeat this area is clear. All mental-health professionals chasing Kate Brady have been deleted.' She rolled back, removing an SAS helmet. 'You're going to be okay, pet. It was a tough call there, but I've got it under control.'

I was giggling, which was pretty rare, these days. 'It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it?'

'It does indeed, pet, but you've brightened up my day. A fugitive in our midst!'

We both laughed, and I felt very grateful that this complete stranger was giving up her evening to listen to the Bad Shit. Or at least an approximation of it.

'My body is fine,' I insisted. 'It was my head that broke.

I don't mind the hard work, Becca. I just need time out.'

Becca watched me, her brain ticking over. 'Okays, pet, let's talk about what we're going to do.' The smile had gone, although there was still warmth in her face. 'I can help you keep your job, if you want, but I need to know you're serious about it. If you've just run off to hang out on a pretty farm and play with the nice horsies, you've come to the wrong place.'

I shook my head. 'No way. I want a routine, I want physical work and I want to live somewhere that couldn't be more different from, well, from Dublin. I'm not here for the nice horsy games.'

Becca rested her chin on her fingertips, studying me. She had a sweet little snub nose, just like my mum's. 'This is one of the hardest jobs there is, Kate. Grooms only survive because they want it so badly. They never get enough sleep, they work in the snow and driving rain, they're never allowed to be ill or tired, and they don't really have control of their own lives. The horses always come first. Your family, for starters – you're not going to get time off to go over to Ireland any time soon. Are you okay with that?'

I took a deep breath. 'My family aren't expecting to see me for a very long time,' I said truthfully. 'They're not happy about it but – well, they'll survive.'

I smiled briefly, because the guilt was overwhelming and I didn't know what else to do.

'Okay. Well, on top of that, Mark's an arsehole and Tiggy – she's the Head Girl – she's only OK if you play her game. Oh, and Joe's a nice lad but he's also a dirty sex pest.'

'Grand.'

She smiled wryly. 'This is not an easy job. Are you sure you want it?'

'Absolutely,' I said.

Becca nodded, apparently satisfied. 'We'll forget we ever had this conversation, then. You're going to work your little peaches off and you'll have forgotten about Dublin and your "executive stress" in five minutes. Deal?'

'Deal. But what about all the stuff I'm meant to know about horses?'

'Once you've learned to shovel shit, love, we'll teach you the rest. Auntie Becca'll sort you out.'

'But if Mark Waverley's as bad as you say, you'll lose your job.'

'Very noble of you. But where are you going to go if I don't help you out, like?'

A good question. The world yawned emptily around me; the world that was no longer my friend. 'I'd sort something out.'

Becca grinned. 'Kate, love, it'll be okay. By the time Mark even bothers to ask your name you'll know enough to blag it.'

I breathed out slowly. This might just be the answer. 'Why are you doing this for me?' I asked her.

To my surprise, Becca blushed. 'Never you mind,' she muttered. 'Never you mind about that, pet. Anyways, do we have a deal?'

I held out my hand, soft, plump and white, and took Becca's, rough, red and dirty. 'We have a deal,' I said softly. 'And whatever reason you have for helping me, Becca, thank you.'

'There's a lot to learn,' Becca said, still pink-cheeked. 'But we'll get there.' She pulled out a packet of tobacco and some Rizlas, rolling a fag with mesmerizing dexterity. I suddenly loved this crop-haired, nose-ringed Geordie woman. I wanted to grab her grubby fleece and hug her all night. I was so completely lost and alone, so totally disconnected from the entire universe, that my boundaries were shot. I'd have hugged a chicken, if it was nice to me.

'Get yourself settled, then come downstairs to meet the others. Later we'll do a tutorial.'

I forced my best smile. It was like a migraine. 'Grand! Thanks! I'll be down in a sec!'

'Cool. Later.'

'Oh! Becca?'

'Yeah?'

'What time do we start in the morning?'

'Seven.' She sounded casual, as if this were a reasonable time of day to be awake. Let alone working in the mud and cold.

I sank back on my very mediocre bed.

'Are you going to kill yourself, pet?'

'I am.'

'Right you are. I'll leave you to it.' She left, humming along to the trance music coming out of her bedroom.

I slid the bolt across my door and went over to shut my curtains. I glanced out beyond the floodlit horse yard to the silky blackness of the fields, feeling vaguely hopeful again. I'd just have to take it one day at a time and trust I was up to it. Because, really, it was that or return to my old life, which was an impossibility. Quite apart from the

Dante-proportioned inferno I'd fled, I felt a horrible certainty that my family and friends would never forgive what I'd done.

No, *this* was my life now. It was 17 March and spring would officially begin in three days. Spring would inch slowly forward into summer, never back into winter, and if I knew what was good for me, I'd tag along.

As I turned away my eye was caught by a sudden movement at the edge of the blackness and my heart stopped. Muscles weakened by fear, I turned back to see what it was.

A big grey dog trotted in from the fields and across the yard towards Mark Waverley's house. A bright floodlight snapped on. Downstairs a door banged and laughter from the kitchen floated up the thirty-three stairs that lay between me and the world. 'Happy St Patrick's Day!' someone shouted.

I pulled the curtains closed and breathed.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.